

**Lords of the Silk Route:
Violent Non-State Actors in Central
Asia**

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this forty-third volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the United States Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). This paper, while it reports the results of research undertaken across the year prior to the events of September 11 and their aftermath, presents an analysis that is both timely and relevant given those events. This important paper represents the kind of original thinking that this Institute was designed in the hope of fostering. The two authors—each of whom is individually the winner of a previous INSS outstanding research award—develop and test a systematic, targeted, and useful methodology for examining the non-state political violence and its practitioner that the United States now faces. Their analysis also is grounded in Central Asia, a new but increasingly important region to United States military interest and presence. The paper stands well on either of those legs—a systematic methodology for violent non-state actors or a detailed and security oriented examination of an emerging critical region. Taken together, the two legs mark it as a singularly significant work, one well worthy of serious study.

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JAMES M. SMITH
Director

LORDS OF THE SILK ROUTE: VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS IN CENTRAL ASIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Central Asia, as in much of the developing world, the warlord is returning triumphant while the state withers in its arbitrary, post-colonial borders. Transnational dynamics at the sub-national level are interacting to create regional incubators for violent non-state actors (VNSAs). Some VNSAs already pose a real, direct challenge to state sovereignty and regional security. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, for example, employs terrorist and guerrilla tactics to seek the ouster of Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov. As VNSAs gain greater access to resources and transnational networks, they increasingly pose a threat to neighboring states and the security of non-regional powers. The ancient Silk Route, which once brought Chinese treasures to Europe and the Middle East, is thriving again. The caravans of the 21st Century, however, are moving a loathsome cargo at the core of transnational security issues facing the international community.

It is the contention of this paper that the new warlords of the developing world pose a pressing security challenge for which regional governments and western powers, including the United States (US), are not adequately prepared. The post-heroic objectives and asymmetric methods embraced by VNSAs shatter the assumptions of the "Clausewitzian Trinity" on which the modern nation-state roots its conception of conflict. The new VNSAs are already challenging our understanding of how traditional constructs of deterrence, coercion and warfighting apply. Developing viable policies and responses to these threats demands a rigorous examination of the linkages between the spawning of VNSAs and transnational security issues at the sub-national level. We further assert that non-traditional security issues, such as resource scarcity and demographics pressures, are gaining relevance as explanatory factors in the transformation from passive individual deprivation to violent collective action.

Our approach to understanding the new face of violent collective action adds value by deviating from the reliance on the state as the primary unit of analysis. The standard approach, particularly in Central Asia, is to focus on state failure and the important role played by other states in supporting the struggling regime or furthering its decay. While we do not discount the value of state-centered approaches, we are convinced they must be

complemented by an examination of the dynamics working at the sub-national level with the non-state actor as the primary unit of analysis. To this end, our principal objective is to introduce an open systems analytical framework that provides explanatory, and possibly predicative, insight to the system of relationships and the cycle of violence at work in Central Asia. Although this framework is in its initial offering, we contend that its further development will yield benefits for comparative study in other regions of the world. Our second objective is to offer insight to the roots of violence most likely to create the environment in which VNSAs emerge and prosper. We also take on the objective of engendering an appreciation for the range of potential VNSAs organizational types and the forms of collective violence employed to increase their power. Our final objective is to explain the linkages between roots of violence and VNSAs, focusing on reinforcing behaviors as well as failures in state governance and identity mobilization as key transformational engines.